UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

FACULTY OF MUSIC

presents

Thursday Noon Series

Philip Thomson, Piano

Felix Blumenfeld
24 Preludes, Op. 17

Thursday, October 1, 1998
12:10 p.m.
Walter Hall
Free admission

PROGRAMME

Felix Blumenfeld (1863-1931)
24 Preludes, Op. 17

1. C Major

The preludes open solemnly with *Andante religioso*. This invitation to prayer is entirely apt as the first of this intense set. Blemenfeld wishes us to know at the outset that we are not in for an hour of light entertainment. The C major prelude consists of a slowly undulating theme (which is contained in the scope of three semitones) stated three times, and a few closing *pianissimo* chords. Its interesting and effective piano writing requires the pianist to play the melody inside of the chords lather than on top of them.

2. A Minor

Immediately we are plunged into turmoil. The purposefully ambiguous writing (the pianistic figure sounds in six-eight, but the time signature is in fact three-four) combines with unusual harmonic turns and unexpected changes of dynamics to produce an agitated effect, heightened near the end by the sudden entry of a slow-moving melody by the left hand under the rapid figure played by the right in a brilliantly conceived and wonderfully written episode that creates a positively disturbing atmosphere as both hands creep slowly in their different tempos to the bottom end of the keyboard.

3. G Major

This is the closest we shall come in this opus to being carefree. It is composed of a quick legato motive surrounded by staccato chords, and ends suddenly in a high *pianissimo* wink. It is the shortest of the *preludes*, and is followed by...

4.E Minor

...the longest. The theme of the remarkable E minor prelude attempts four increasingly desperate times in ever higher registers of the piano to escape from the unwavering accompaniment, but in the end, the right hand comes to understand that the left, while having been supportive dynamically and harmonically, is nevertheless not to be denied the mood it set in the first place, and the last half of the piece consists of the melody's slow but inevitable downward journey back home to E minor.

5. D Major

While the second prelude in three-four can sound like six-eight, the fifth, written in six-eight, often sounds as if it is in three-four. Its theme, abounding in supporting 9th, 11th and 13th chords, is presented twice, the second time more lushly and passionately, before an angelic coda quietly closes the piece.

6. B Minor

The rousing menial character of the B minor prelude contrasts starkly with its predecessor. The final prelude of Book 1 is a work of sharp rhythm and pianistically novel writing, and its ending is unexpected but perfect.

7. A Major

Book 2 opens quietly but sonorously with an allegro whose melodic outlines are found sometimes in a lilting left-hand motive and sometimes in the top notes of a perpetual figure played by the right. The restatement of the theme is presented *forte* and is extended by a series of modulations with a continuous crescendo that leads to a climatic return to A major. A twelve-bar coda finishes with two *fortissimo* chords, making, in the seven preludes we have heard so far, only the second time Blumenfeld has written a loud ending.

8. F-sharp Minor

The light and quick 8th prelude has a constantly running 16th-note figure rising and falling above supporting chords which twice interrupt themselves to become a brief melodic line, guiding the listener's ear away from the rapid right hand. Less than a minute into the prelude, the chords and right-hand figure of the opening are again heard, but instead of the expected restatement, the 16th-notes quickly rise to the high treble, where they visit for only a moment before running back down again to end the piece gracefully.

9. E Major

The only prelude without a single soft bar, it is also harmonically the simplest, never straying from its first and firmly established tonality of E major. I, and I imagine most Canadians, cannot hear this piece without noticing an unintended quote from our National Anthem, which had been penned in 1880.

10. C-sharp Minor

The C-sharp minor prelude is profoundly expressive and unmistakably Russian. The wistful theme of its opening is presented in

different guises before it erupts in a passionate cry, subsiding only to catch enough breath for another outburst. This, however, is short-lived, and the last bars are a resigned echo of the beginning. A wonderful piece of writing, and one of transcendent emotion.

11. B Major

The irresistibly beautiful 11th prelude, following, as it does, the heart-wrenching C-sharp minor, might seem at first to be unsuitably placed: both of these preludes state their themes tenderly at first, them more fully, and proceed through modulations of key until they arrive at climatic and impassioned restatements in the tonic key. They both ebb suddenly, dying away in *pianissimo* chords. They are b[illegible]eautiful and intensely emotional. And their lengths are nearly identical. But Blumenfeld knew what he was doing. There is a g[illegible] behind the composition and juxtaposition of the *preludes*, and the effect of these two side-by-side form part of the well considered and satisfying shape of the whole.

12. G-sharp Minor

The last prelude of Book 2 consists of a short running 8th note motive of increasing texture and volume, making an exciting and rhythmically unstoppable drive to the end. The last statement is punctuated by sharp and rhythmically no-nonsense octaves in the bass.

13. F-sharp Major

A wonderful little lullaby-like creation. Its mood is both necessary and sufficient at this point of the set.

14. E-flat Minor

The momentum of the E-Flat minor prelude is powerful and inexorable. Blumenfeld uses the rising contour of the theme to terrific effect as it appears increasingly higher and more forcefully. Finally, at the height of the tension, the harmonic resolution back to E-flat minor-like the sudden breaking of a fever-abruptly returns us to our original state, if, as also with having had a fever, more exhausted.

15. D-flat Major

The scope of the D-flat prelude is bigh: its melodic range comprises nearly three octaves; its dynamics cover the gamut; and its length is nearly three minutes. And yet, amazingly, this piece is essentially one phrase and a coda. Without sounding in the least artificial and without meandering, Blumenfeld has managed to keep a melodic line continually moving and pressing towards the D-flat resolution for sixty-seven bars. The work's impetus, and the reason that its protracted melody does not appear forced, lies in the richness and drama of the piano writing. The last fifteen bars after the resolution offer us, finally, a chance to exhale.

16. B-flat Minor

Upon first reading through the *preludes*, this one took immediate hold of me, and is the first one I learned. Its theme, stated simply and yearningly at first, gradually blossoms and eventually becomes massive and powerful before subsiding into an echo of the opening.

17. A-flat Major

Only a pianist could have written this flitting five-against-two type of perpetual motion. The melody appears as the third of each five-n[illegible]ure played by the right hand, and is supported by a gentle eighth-note accompaniment in the left. The writing is as ingenious as it is graceful.

18. F Minor

Blumenfeld has given the title *Memento mori* to the f-minor prelude. The slowly moving six-eight theme is supported by subtle harmonies that often gently lead us away from, rather than into, a particular tonality. Finally, though, the cadences in the coda establish that we are indeed home again in the original key.

19. E-flat Major SIDE B

Besides his renown as a pianist, composer and teacher, Blumenfeld was also famed as a conductor, and led the first Russian performance of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. The theme of the 19th prelude bears an unmistakable resemblance to the theme of that opera's *Liebestod*, but whether by coincidence or in homage I do not know.

20. C Minor

The brief but turbulent 20th prelude is prefaced by an equally stormy quotation from Lenau's *Schilflieder*, and indeed could serve as an accompaniment for it. Although the words are not meant to be sung, their rhythm and character were undoubtedly in mind during the composition of the music. But the prelude, however inspired, stands well on its own.

21. B-flat Major

Both the melody and the harmonic foundation of this prelude are the responsibility of the left hand alone. The right hand provides a

peaceful accompanying pulse. The unusual writing demands extremely subtle pedal work, but the piece is superbly crafted and is one of the most beautiful of the entire set.

22. G Minor
The melody of the G minor prelude consists, in its first presentation, of the first of each set of four bouncing notes played by the right hand. These thirty-two graceful and elegant bars lead directly into the second statement of the theme, in which Blumenfeld shifts the melody onto the note just before the beat. The more sonorous treatment supports the melody wonderfully when the theme begins to soar-then a gradual *diminuendo* leads to the final quiet chords.

23. F Major
A light rippling triplet figure forms the background over which the left hand presents its melodic line in three successively higher registers. The third time, the left hand drops out, leaving the triplets to continue softer and softer until they disappear.

24. D Minor
The *preludes* end with a powerful rhythmic drive. There is no melody; the impetus is furnished by a constant three-against-two until the final twelve bars, when the left hand finally joins the right in a triplet rhythmic unison to produce a dramatic coda, ending with a final *fortissimo* chord.

Notes by Philip Thomson

about the artist

Born in Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada, **Philip Thomson** received his early training with Carol O'Neil until he went to the University of Toronto, where his teacher was Pierre Souvairan. Subsequently he studied at New York's Juilliard School under Abbey Simon. While there, he won the school's Liszt competition, and performed the Liszt Concerto No. 1 at Alice Tully Hall, Lincoln Center with the Juilliard Orchestra. Before he finished his studies he had already concertized widely in Canada, both in solo recitals and concerto performances. He has since played with all of Canada's major orchestras. Philip Thomson's "profound musicianship" (Classical Music Magazine, Canada) and "beautifully liquid romanticism," (la Libre Belgigue, Belgium) along with his "sheer piano virtuosity, " (The Ottawa Citizen) and "hair-raising power" (London Financial Times) have also earned him recognition outside of Canada. He has performed in England, France, The Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Hungary, Italy, and throughout Ireland and the Eastern United States. For two weeks in the fall of 1996, he was in Chengdu, China, teaching and performing at the Sichuan Conservatory. His performances have been broadcast on radio and he has appeared several times on CBC television.

Mr. Thomson received wide attention in 1991 when his world premiere recording of the Maxwell edition of Liszt's *De Profundis* and two other rarely-heard Liszt concertos garnered critical acclaim in musical journals throughout the world. De *Profundis* is a 40-minute tour-de-force, the manuscript of which had lain in the Goethe-Schiller Archive in Weimar for over 150 years without any serious musical examination. Mr. Thomson managed to obtain a copy of the manuscript, and found that *De Profundis was* a fully-realized piano concerto, complete with orchestration, which for some reason had been left off in mid-stroke only a few bars before the intended end. He showed the work to Canadian composer Michael Maxwell who copied out the score. Together they prepared a perf g edition, Mr. Maxwell adding the necessary last nine bars. Philip Thomson's recording of this work with the Hungarian State Orchestra for Hungaroton Records was enthusiastically received, and its success secured him the opportunity to perform several countries' premieres of *De Produndis.* The world premiere of the work in Budapest in the spring of 1992 was followed by performances in Italy, at the Festival Pianistico Internazionale di Brescia e Bergamo, and in Canada, at the Montreal International Piano Festival. He performed the American premiere at the International Liszt Festival in Washington, D.C., in 1993.

Philip Thomson's accomplishments have not been limited to the keyboard. While still in high school, he played the violin in both the Provincial and National Youth Orchestras. During those same years, he captured New Brunswick's table tennis championship and was, for one year, that province's chess champion. He also played ice hockey on his school team, a sport at which he did not excel. In 1991, a few weeks before going to Hungary to record the Liszt *De Profundis,* he fulfilled a long-standing desire to parachute out of an airplane.

An active teacher, Philip Thomson taught for five years at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, and has been on the faculty of the University of Akron, Ohio, since 1994. Mr. Thomson records for Naxos Records, and has completed the CDs of Liszt's music, the first of two of which were released in the summer of 1997. The third was released in the summer of 1998.